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ABSTRACT

The requirements for vocational assessment of special needs students in the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act are not well served by the traditional kinds of vocational assessment often practiced. Instead, vocational assessment for the purposes of responding to the mandate of the Act should be defined within the context of answering service delivery questions that naturally arise with respect to the successful completion of a vocational education program by an individual. A model of vocational assessment for special needs students should consist of five domains: screening, placement, program planning, monitoring, and individual program evaluation. The model described in this paper contains several characteristics that should make it particularly appropriate for use with secondary mildly handicapped and disadvantaged students. First, the model conforms directly with the language and intent of the Act. Second, the model maximizes the use of special services personnel directly performing services in the vocational classrooms, rather than encouraging the development of vocational evaluators as a specialized group distinct from teachers. Third, this model does not require the expense of commercial systems and formal laboratory space. Finally, the model conforms well with individualized planning cycles associated with individualized education programs or individualized vocational program planning. Perhaps its greatest strength is that it combines the duties of assessment and direct service personnel, and places both functions where they belong--in the vocational education program assisting the vocational educator who is delivering the instruction. (KC)

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Vocational Assessment of the Special Needs Learner: A Special Education Perspective

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Running Head: Voc Assessment

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Introduction

This paper takes a special education perspective to the vocational assessment process for the Vocational Special Needs Assessment Symposium. As such, the reader will find that its focus has been shaped by some of the special educational assessment research appearing in the literature in the past 10 to 15 years. Indeed, the model and processess contained in this paper deviate sharply from traditional vocational assessment practices that are the norm in much of current vocational evaluation. The position taken however, is that this traditional vocational evaluation model does not meet many of the assessment needs contained in the Carl Perkins Act, and can benefit from the research base in special education assessment.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section briefly discusses the Carl Perkins assessment mandate and develops some guidelines that appear to be implied by its language. Also in this section will be a contemporary definition of vocational assessment and some assumptions that should assist the reader in understanding the context in which the proposed model and processes should be interpreted. The second section contains an assessment model, along with the purposes that underlie its components. Also included in this section are some suggested practices that appear reasonable to implement the model.

Section I

The Perkins Mandate

Section 401.101(b)(1) of the final rules and regulations implementing the Act states:

> Each local educational agency...shall provide to each handicapped or disadvantaged student that enrolls in a vocational education program -
> (i) An assessment of the interests, abilities, and special needs for that student with respect to completing successfully the vocational education program;
> (ii) Special services, including adaptation of curriculum, instruction, equipment, and facilities designed to meet the needs established under paragraph (b)(1)(i) of this section;

This language reflects only minor grammatical modifications to that contained in Section 204(c)(1) and (2) of the Act, and provides virtually no interpretive guidance, beyond the language itself, to assist in its implementation. Indeed, neither the "Summary of Major Provisions" nor the "Summary of Comments and Responses" which accompany these final regulations make any mention of this assessment mandate (hereafter referred to as "the mandate"). Hence, vocational education professionals have only this language to guide state and local assessment policy development.

Several elements in the language of the mandate do give substantive direction, however. First, the mandate refers to "local education agencies" and not "eligible recipients" meaning that postsecondary institutions receiving federal vocational education dollars are exempted from its requirements.

Second, vocational assessments must be provided to both handicapped and disadvantaged students, including those disadvantaged individuals who qualify under either academic or economic criteria. This will require LEAs who have not already done so to establish identification procedures to systematically locate such students. For individuals with handicapping conditions, special education processes that are in place in most school districts will accommodate this identification process. However for disadvantaged students, especially those who may be eligible under academic criteria, many local educational systems are likely to be much less well developed in their capacity to identify these individuals. While these criteria are spelled out in some detail (**Federal Register**, August 18, 1985, p. 33233), much local discretion remains and local policy, relative to interpreting identification criteria and developing accompanying systems, will need to be established.

The language of the mandate and the definitions of handicapped and disadvantaged individuals are very clear in establishing an individualized planning component to the assessment process as well. Not only must both groups of individuals be identified through a screening process; in addition, the regulatory definitions of "disadvantaged" and "handicapped" individuals require that such handicapping or disadvantaging conditions must prevent them from succeeding in

their vocational education program without some form of special assistance or services in order to be eligible for such services. The clause "with respect to completing successfully the vocational education program" in the assessment mandate, along with the "Special services...designed to meet the needs identified..." subsection, are both consistent with this success criterion as well. This wording also clearly suggests a classroom-based achievement-testing orientation, rather than a traditional psychometric aptitude-testing focus, to the assessment process. Indeed, the word "aptitudes" does not even appear in the mandate as a construct upon which vocational assessments must focus.

Definition of Vocational Assessment

Given the components of the mandate discussed above, traditional definitions of vocational assessment appear unsuited in providing guidance to local educators as they shape their assessment programs. For example, the notion of matching an individual with his or her personal interests and characteristics to an occupation with its requirements and routines, is not supported in the mandate. Individuals, with their interests, abilities and special needs must be assessed relative to <u>local vocational education programs</u>, not occupations. Thus, matching individual interests and aptitudes with D. O. T. job titles or even locally available jobs would appear inappropriate or

dysfucntional under this mandate, unless the vocational education program involves community-based training in those occupational environments.

Vocational assessment for the purposes of responding to the mandate, then, should be defined within the context of answering service delivery questions that naturally arise with respect to the successful completion of a vocational education program by an individual. These services should begin with an exploration of the various vocational education program alternatives and end with an evaluation of the appropriateness of the programs and services provided to the individual, along with an assessment of transitional needs to support the individual's postsecondary options.

Assumptions

There are several assumptions underlying the discussion that follows. These assumptions are not consistent with those that govern vocational evaluation as it has been delivered by vocational rehabilitation or as it has evolved in vocational education in recent years. However, they are critical to an understanding of the model programs and practices that are included in this paper.

Trainee characteristics. It is assumed that the handicapped and disadvantaged individuals who will benefit most from this

assessment model are those for whom mainstreamed vocational education with support is appropriate.

Personnel. An assumption is made that vocational assessments should be conducted by those individuals who, within the service delivery system, are most likely to benefit from and utilize its results. It is assumed then, that special needs resource teachers, vocational guidance personnel, and regular vocational educators should conduct vocational assessments, not specially licensed or certified vocational evaluators whose sole job it is to conduct such assessments. Responsibility for the overall vocational assessment process does need to be fixed with one individual, probably the special needs resource teacher. However, the mandate does not appear to support the development of a highly specialized, separate, vocational evaluator.

Environment. This assessment model assumes that the only appropriate environment in which to assess "an individual's interests, abilities, and special needs with respect to successfully completing a vocational education program" is the actual environment(s) in which training is likely to occur. Moreover, the instrumentation should be contextually-bound to that environment as well. This assumption would eliminate the use of vocational evaluation laboratories in favor of regular classrooms; similarly it would eliminate commercially developed

instrumentation in favor of local performance samples, quick informal monitoring checksheets, or instructionally relevant situational processes. This assumption would also result in downplaying the use of economic criteria to determine eligibility for disadvantaged services, and maximizing the use of school grades or failure to achieve minimal acompetencies to determine eligibility as academically disadvantaged.

Systematic process. Finally, this model assumes a systematic and individualized assessment process whose activities are driven by regular vocational education program delivery. In most cases, this would suggest a system that operates within the context of the school year and the planning cycles associated with individualized plan development such as the IEP.

Section II

Given the definition of vocational assessment outlined above, one of answering instructionally relevant service delivery questions within the context of the calssroom environment, it seems to make the most sense to break down the assessment process into the variety of purposes it is designed to serve. These purposes, and their associated service delivery questions, have appeared in the special education literature in recent years and generally have been conceptualized as falling into five chronological domains: screening, placement, program planning,

monitoring, and individual program evaluation. The remainder of this section will be devoted to a discussion of the "who, what, where, when, and why" elements within each of these assessment domains.

Screening

Why screen a student? Vocational assessment for the purpose of screening students is the first domain in the assessment chronology. Screening answers several service delivery questions:

1. Is vocational education/training the best or most appropriate curriculum for this student, or are college preparatory or general track curricula more appropriate?

2. What do the student's parents/guardians believe to be the best curriculum?

3. Is vocational education a curricular area of interest to the student, and if so, is there a supportive service structure available to support such a curriculum choice?

What is being measured? The primary constructs being measured in the screening process are student/parent interest in the variety of vocational education programs that are available, and the student's basic skill levels in reading, mathematics, and social behavior. If the student or his/her parent have no interest in any of the vocational programs that are available, then vocational education clearly should be considered very

carefully before it is included in the student's curriculum. Similarly,, if the student does not possess the functional academic and/or social skills necessary to survive in a vocational education environment, even considering whatever levels of intensive support may be available to assist the student, then the regular vocational curriculum must again be scrutinized very carefully as an appropriate educational placement.

When should screening occur? Screening should occur at a period early enough in a student's schooling to allow thorough consideration of all curriculum options, including vocational education. Thus, if the screening process results in a decision not to enroll in a vocational education program, ample time needs to be available for the student and his/her parents to consider other curriculum alternatives. Similarly, if screening results in a positive decision to enroll in vocational education, the process must be timed in such a way that the placement and planning domains can be appropriately considered.

Section 204(b) of the Act provides some assistance in suggesting the timing of a screening process. This provision requires that handicapped and disadvantaged students and their parents be provided with information about vocational education opportunities and their eligibility requirements at least one year prior to the time when vocational education programs are

generally first available in the state and under no circumstances later than the beginning of the ninth grade. It clearly makes sense that local vocational educators combine this information dissemination requirement with their school's assessment program.

Who should conduct screening?. The vocational guidance coordinator along with sending school guidance personnel have two sets of responsibilities related to screening. The first responsibility is one of identification of all handicapped and disadvantaged students in their administrative region. Given that the within-state funding formula for distributing handicapped and disadvantaged setaside dollars is driven by actual numbers of handicapped, academically disadvantaged, economically disadvantaged, and limited-English speaking students served by vocational education the prior year, this identification component will need to be addressed by each eligible recipient of federal dollars in a thorough and systematic manner.

The second screening responsibility is to ensure that both handicapped and disadvantaged students and their parents receive the necessary information to allow them to decide if vocational education is the appropriate curriculum for their son or daughter. By carefully developing local processes relative to both of these identification and information dissemination screening components, local vocational education personnel will

not only be providing important assessment services to their handicapped and disadvantaged constituents, but also will be fulfilling several other important federally-required mandates as well.

Where whould screening occur?. The initial identification and information dissemination requirements discussed above should occur in the local high schools that send students to regional vocational programs. In order to assure that students and their parents have a full understanding of the variety of vocational programs available, however, regional vocational centers may find it desireable to offer exploratory vocational courses in the actual vocational laboratories to first semester ninth graders. In this way it will be possible for students to best make informed choices about preferred curricula based upon direct knowledge of different vocational education options, teacher preferences, laboratory characteristics, transportation and scheduling conditions, and other considerations that are important for all students and their parents in their curriculum selection process.

Summary. Assessment for the purpose of screening serves several important functions: identification of handicapped and disadvantaged students, informing these students and their parents about vocational education opportunities, and exploring

student interests in the available program options. These screening functions would appear best accommodated by some form of test/review process coordinated by vocational guidance, and sending school guidance and special/compensatory education personnel for identification purposes, and by an integrated exploratory program during the ninth grade to allow students to explore alternatives and make informed choices.

Placement

Placement is the second assessment domain, and can be distinguished chronologically from screening, within the service delivery context, in that it assumes that a student has undergone a screening process and has elected to pursue vocational education, and needs to further define the actual program option.

Why assess for placement?. Whereas screening asks the question "Is vocational education the appropriate curriculum?", assessment for placement asks the question "Which specific program?", such as a program in automotives, cosmetology, or health occupations.

What is assessed?. Assessing for program placement requires an examination of student-related variables and program-related variables. Student variables include interest in specific program(s), and a general matching of minimal academic or physical requirements with student competencies.

Program variables are critical to successful placement decisions and include: consideration of future job availability across program alternatives; the existence of successful cooperative education or capstone programs across alternatives; the use of best instructional practices (i.e. cooperative group learning, using a variety of instructional delivery modes, individualizing instruction, etc.) by different vocational instructors; and the integration of special needs students with non-special needs students.

When should assessment for placement occur?. Assessment for placement will naturally begin as students and their parents try to decide if they want vocational education at all. However, placement considerations extend beyond the screening decision to include the time it takes to examine student records and to assess program variables for the best match with student interests. Ultimately, the placement process for handicapped students will culminate with the annual review process for the IEP, and should include long-term goal specification for its vocational component. For disadvantaged students in districts that do not have individualized planning formats, the placement process will terminate with acceptance into the vocational program selected.

Who should assess for placement?. Again, the processes are likely to differ for handicapped and for disadvantaged students. Staffing team members including, at a minimum, a special educator, the regular vocational educator, vocational and sending school guidance personnel, and the vocational special needs resource teacher should all be involved in the placement process. For disadvantaged students, the special education staff would not be involved, but the rest of the personnel mentioned above would be, along with any compensatory education staff.

Where should assessment for placement occur?. Assessment for placement should involve activity at both the sending school and the regional vocational program. At the regional vocational school, an exploratory vocational program would allow students to sample and choose from a variety of program alternatives. Also students and parents will gain information about integration levels of non-special needs students, and about the variety and quality of instructional practices that different vocational teachers utilize.

Ultimately though, the placement process will need to involve a staffing decision at the sending school which will coordinate all information gathered during the exploratory program with home school historical and/or functional academic assessment information.

Summary. Assessment for the purposes of specific program placement involves matching student interests and competencies with program options and related variables. Areas for specific program modification to accommodate special needs begin to evolve in this process as well. It would appear that the most functional process to utilize for the placement domain would again be the same exploratory program used in screening along with analyses of existing historical data about the student, and analyses of program related variables that are likely to influence the ultimate success of that placement.

Program Planning

Program planning, the third domain of vocational assessment, involves examining the interactions between individual student characteristics, the curriculum, and the learning environment to determine what curricular and environmental modifications, and other related services are necessary to make the program placement successful.

Why assess for program planning?. The underlying rationale for assessing for program planning is derived from the regulatory part of the definitions of handicapped and disadvantaged students (**Federal Register**, August 16, 1985, pp. 33233-33234). These provisions state that an individual is only handicapped or disadvantaged if they require special programs, services, or

assistance to enable them to succeed in vocational education programs. Assuming these individuals have been screened and placed in a vocational education program, the next service delivery question to ask is "What special programs, services, or assistance must be provided to this individual in order to assure, or maximize the likelihood of success in his/her vocational education program?" As indicated in subsection (ii) quoted on page 2 of this manuscript, these special services may include "adaptation of curriculum, instruction, equipment, and facilities" along with the provision of other forms of related services, such as physical or occupational therapy, speech or school health services, transportation or medical services, etc.

What is being assessed?. Several different requirements are measured for program planning, all of which must be functionally related to the classroom curriculum and environment in which instruction is to occur. First, student achievement levels in academics, social behavior, safety, etc., should be assessed relative to the curriculum. Second, the vocational classroom conditions under which the student learns most efficiently must be examined (such as small group vs individualized instruction, verbal vs visual instructional delivery, etc.). Finally, the need for other related services such as health, medical, counseling, services should be determined.

For handicapped students, the outcomes of assessment for program planning are the vocationally-related objectives for the IEP and the specification of related services. For disadvantaged students, the outcome should also be an individualized written plan, although requirements for such plans are not mandated by federal law, and will vary with locaal and state policies.

When should assessment for program planning occur?. This assessment process should begin at the time when placement decisions are made (preferably during the Spring semester prior to enrollment in vocational education). For both handicapped and disadvantaged students, assessment for program planning should end no later than the first month after the vocational education program begins.

Who should assess for program planning?. During the initial planning, input from home school special and support services personnel along with the vocational special needs resource teachers and the vocational education teacher are necessary to ensure coordination of home school and vocational curriculum content. The actual development of the vocational education objectives, however, should be developed at the regional vocational center by the vocational teacher and the special needs resource teacher.

Where should assessment for program planning occur?. This assessment function should occur initially at the home school, and move to the vocational school as learning objectives are developed, and teaching and learning styles are assessed.

Summary. Program planning is an assessment process that identifies the support needed by individual students to be successful in a vocational education program. Some of this information, again, will be provided through checklists and evaluations of students' progress in the exploratory vocational coursework described earlier. In general, direct observation of student performance and informal, teacher-made instrumentation should be utilized to best ensure functionality of results relative to curriculum placement.

Monitoring of Individual Progress

Monitoring of individual progress is an assessment domain designed to ensure that the services, adaptations, and other forms of special/compensatory education continue to be appropriate, and that the need for other forms of interventions do not arise.

Why monitor individual progress?. Within a service delivery context, monitoring invividual progress involves answering the two questions: (a) " How well is the student progressing in the program?" and (b) "What changes, if any, in the support service

structure, the curriculum adaptations, or other forms of special services are necessary?"

What is being measured?. The objectives on the IEP or other individualized plan are being monitored to determine progress within the vocational education program, as well as performance on specific activities designed to implement those objectives. Also, attention needs to be given to the potential need for a change in services/objectives.

When should individual progress be monitored?. Student progress in his/her vocational education program should be monitored frequently, probably weekly or even more often if necessary, to ensure focused and effective services. Again, planning the use of quick, informal, teacher-mmade instrumentation will prevent the individual monitoring process from becoming too tiem-consuming.

Who should monitor individual progress?. The responsibility to monitor student progress should be shared between the vocational education teacher and the special needs resource teacher.

Where should monitoring of individual progress occur?. The vocational laboratory or whatever training environment being used should be the setting where progress monitoring will occur.

Summary. Monitoring of individual progress involves the use of direct, frequent, criterion-referenced measures of performance and activities as outlined in an individualized plan. These should be reflective of both process and product measurement.

Individual Program Evaluation

Individual program evaluation provides school staff, students, and their parents with the opportunity to examine the student's vocational education program and determine the need for and nature of any necessary changes in ensuing years.

Why assess for program evaluation?. Two service delivery questions arise in individual program evaluation: "To what extent has the student's program been successful?" and "What changes in curriculum, placement, program modifications, and monitoring schedule and/or related services are necessary?"

What is being assessed?. As with monitoring individual progress, the student's performance relative to predetermined goals and objectives will be measured. Also, the results of this measurement process will assist in determining the relative appropriateness of the related/supportive services, curriculum modifications, etc. that have been developed to assist the student in achieving his/her goals and objectives.

When should individual programs be evaluated?. No criteria exist in the Perkins Act specifying strict dates for program evaluation, but it seems reasonable to examine student programs at least twice annually for their overall appropriateness. The school's marking periods may provide the most logical schedule for such evaluations.

Who should assess for program evaluation?. Since the results of a student's program evaluation hav implications curriculum change as well as potential changes in placement and program planning, the individuals who should be responsible for conducting and interpreting program evaluations might include the vocational special needs resource teacher, the vocational teacher, the student and his/her parents, and sending school special or compensatory education staff.

Where should program evaluation occur?. As with most curriculum-referenced assessment practices assessment for the purpose of program evaluation should occur in the environment in which the vocational education occurred.

Summary

The vocational assessment model and practices outlined in this paper contain several characteristics which should make them particularly appropriate for use with secondary mildly handicapped and disadvantaged students. First, the conform

directly with the language and intent of the new federal legislation, and indeed will facilitate other requirements in the Act as well. Second, the model and practices maximize the use of special services personnel directly performing services in the vocational classrooms, rather than encouraging the development of vocational evaluators as a highly specialized group who are distinctly different in their service responsibilities from special needs teachers. Third, this model does not require the expense of commercial systems and formal laboratory space. And finally, the model conforms well with individualized planning cycles associated with IEP or IVP planning.

Generally, the largest costs of this model are the personnel time and administrative difficulties necessary to develop the vocational exploratory coursework that are at the heart of this model. It can be done, however, and can prove a valuable recruitment tool as well as a systematic and curriculum-based assessment process. Perhaps its greatest strength is that it combines the duties of assessment and direct service personnel, and places both functions where they belong - in the vocational education program assisting the vocational educator who is delivering the instruction.